

MVSKOKE (CREEK) CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

AGRICULTURE

By the time of first contact, the Mvskoke people had developed a highly integrated system of hunting, gathering, and farming. Each of these activities was a communal effort. All individuals within a tribal town were responsible for some portion of the food getting. Older boys and men were responsible for hunting and fishing, while women and girls were responsible for gathering and tending the gardens. Small children and the elderly helped to the best of their abilities. This way, food belonged to the entire community and everyone was fed.

Mvskoke people had been cultivating bottle gourds and squash since approximately 1000 BC. Squash was an important food source, while the gourds were used as water vessels, ladles, cups, bowls, rattles, and masks. By AD 200, the Creek were cultivating a variety of wild seed crops. After AD 800, “modern” domesticated corn and beans were common throughout the Southeast.

Methods of getting food varied according to the yearly cycle. Winter was considered the most important hunting season, while fishing was most productive during the spring. The first crops were planted during the spring, tended throughout the summer, and harvested before the coming of fall.

Gathering was important year round, but also followed a seasonal cycle. Spring and summer pickings included wild grapes, blackberries, mulberries, strawberries, apples, and plums. By fall, chestnuts, pecans, hickory nuts, black walnuts, and acorns were ready for gathering. Sunflower seeds were also easy to harvest and store for the winter.

Contrary to theories, which trace North American seed crops for a South American source, it is now known that the Southeast was a separate center of domestication. Wild gourds, sunflowers, and seed plants such as marsh elder and chenopod, were among the first southeastern staple crops. “Modern” corn, or maize, arrived from Mexico around AD 200. It quickly became the most important vegetable food in the Creek diet, as they learned to prepare it in many ways and utilize it in dozens of unique dishes.

CLANS

While families include people who are directly related to each other, CLANS are composed of all people who are descendants of the same ancestral clan grouping. Each person belongs to the clan of his or her mother, who belongs to the clan of her mother. This is called matrilineal descent. Fathers are important within the family system; but within the clan, it is the mother’s brother (the mother’s nearest blood relation) who functions as the primary disciplinarian and role model. Clan members do not claim “blood relation”, but consider each other family due to their

membership in the same clan. The same titles are used for both family and clan relations. For example, clan members of approximately the same age consider each other as Brother and Sister, even if they have never met before.

Clan ties are strong. They have served as a traditional bond, which continues to unite and empower Creek people even today. The clan system adds structure to society by influencing marriage choices, personal friendships, and political and economic partnerships. It is traditionally considered a serious offense to kill or eat one's own clan animal.

CLOTHING

Early Mvskoke peoples wore clothing made of woven plant materials and animal skins, depending on the climate. During the summer, they preferred lightweight fabrics woven from tree bark, grasses, or reeds. During the harsh winters, animal skins and fur were used for their warmth.

During the 1600's, the influence of European fashion became apparent in Creek clothing styles. Cloth was more comfortable and colorful than buckskin, and quickly became a popular trade item throughout the Southeast. Bolts of cloth could be obtained in a variety of patterns and textures, and allowed an individualized style of dress to evolve. Many Creeks were soon using the trader's novelties and trinkets such as bells, ribbons, beads, and pieces of mirror.

Men began wearing ruffled cloth shirts and jackets, with buckskin leggings. Men's shirts were gathered at the waist by a beaded and tasseled sash. Another woven band was worn across the chest or over one shoulder, and held a decorative tobacco pouch.

Women began wearing cloth dresses and deep-pocketed aprons. They decorated these ruffled dresses with ribbon, and glass and silver trade beads. In their hair, they wore silver brooches and colored silk ribbons, which hung almost to the ground. Men and women both wore soft deerskin moccasins. These too were decorated, often quite elaborately, with beadwork designs.

Different styles of dress were worn on different occasions. During the ball games, men wore only a breechcloth. These games were very fast paced and extra clothing would only have inhibited movement. During the Green Corn Ceremony, women participated in a special Ribbon Dance. For this special occasion, women wore beautiful dresses covered with flowing ribbons. During today's ceremonies, women still wear their traditional ribbon dresses. Men, however, have now adapted the boots, jeans, and fitted shirt common throughout the west.

EARLY HISTORY

According to most traditional legends, the Creek people were born from the navel of the earth, located somewhere within the Rocky Mountains. After a time the Earth became angry, opening up and trying to swallow them back again. They left this land and began to travel towards the rising sun. Their journey led them to the Southeastern region of the United States where they flourished and created complex social structures to govern themselves. The people of the Creek Confederacy were first “encountered” by the Europeans during the late 1500’s.

According to accounts by early explorers and contemporary archaeologists, the Southeastern Indians had by far the richest culture north of Mexico. Daily life was full of magic and mystery, but the importance of ritual was tempered by an equally strong belief in reason and justice. Harmony and balance have always been two very important concepts among the Creek. They are exemplified even within the earliest social structures as the Creek people combined work and play, religion and politics, and respect for nature as both a teacher and supplier of needs.

FAMILIES

Within Creek society, a person is a member of both a *FAMILY* and a *CLAN*. The Creek family is an “extended” one, including more people than the typical “nuclear” family. Each Creek household traditionally consisted of a mother and father, their children (daughters and unmarried sons), the husbands of married daughters, grand children, and grandparents or other elders (from the mother’s side). This is called a Matriarchal pattern-female relatives stay together and men marry into the household, while sons move away to the household of their wife.

Traditional roles and responsibilities of family members were not unlike those of most tribal or village cultures. Men primarily hunted, acted as disciplinarians, held council meetings, and conducted religious ceremonies. Women primarily gathered and prepared food, conducted household activities, and acted as family caregivers. All members of the family supervised education, each playing a part in teaching children the skills and values necessary for becoming a whole and balanced person.

Today, Creek men and women share many of the responsibilities that were once gender specific. Both are responsible for getting food, caring for children, and acting as disciplinarians. Among traditional Creeks, however, there is still division of responsibilities during ceremonial activities. Women are excluded from all activities except that which involve women only. The Creek family is still an “extended” one, with strong kinship ties between all blood and clan relations. Family members still functions as primary educators of Creek children especially concerning aspects of tradition, values, and beliefs.

GREEN CORN CEREMONY

The Green Corn Ceremony is a celebration of the new corn and the New Year. It is a time of forgiveness and purification for both the ceremonial grounds and the Creek people. Old ways are cast aside as the New Year marks a fresh start and new beginning. Every aspect of the ceremony is in some way symbolic of the purification and cleansing that is taking place.

The name of this ceremony refers to its connection with the annual harvest of the New (Green) Corn. This ripening and harvest usually occurs during July or August, and none is eaten before this time. Such thanksgiving and celebration of a single crop is not unusual considering its traditional importance. Corn was by far the most dependable food source as it produced even when other crops failed or hunting was unsuccessful. Corn could be prepared in a variety of ways and could be used in numerous dishes. Even today corn remains a primary food source, because of both its nutritional value and traditional symbolism.

The ceremony is also referred to as the Posketv or Busk which means “to fast”. Fasting occurs in two ways; first as the community abstains from eating all new corn until the harvest celebration marked by the Green Corn, and second as participants abstain from all food and consume only a traditional herbal drink, a powerful emetic which serves to cleanse the body both physically and spiritually. According to traditionalists, the purpose of this medicine is to purify the people, so that they will be in an acceptable mental and physical state to receive the blessings of the New Year.

NATURE

All Southeastern tribes possess a rich and complex tradition of looking to nature for guidance and inspiration. The Creek have long been recognized as astute observers of the natural world. Every aspect of their environment, from basic botany to astronomy, was at some point studied and explained. All of creation was viewed as a web, an interwoven network of existence. Each creation was in some way inter-related with other creations, and none could exist alone.

Like other living beings, animals were viewed as having unique abilities and characteristics, which determined their purpose in life. Some animals, such as wolves and owls, were believed to possess extraordinary powers, which could be used to benefit or punish human beings, depending on how they had been treated. Other animals, such as the turtle, were used as ceremonial symbols because of their special abilities.

The cycle of life could also be observed in all plants and animals. By noticing changes in their environment, the Creek learned when to hunt, when to plant, and when to begin building shelters for the winter. By studying the world around them, they learned where to find water, how to forecast the weather, and what plants were

good to eat. Nature was, and is, a great teacher. Traditionalists say that most people have simply forgotten how to observe.

The ability to forecast the weather was a great asset to the Creek people, as they lived so closely with the land. Only by preparing for inclement weather could they ensure the community's food supply, shelter, and safety. As a result, weather was one of the most studied aspects of nature. Creek men and women observed many signs and omens, which they believed, could help them in predicting the coming weather:

- Geese flying southward indicated the coming of winter, while geese flying northward indicated the return of spring.
- The budding of plants and trees signaled the proper time for planting.
- A flock of sparrows eating off the ground was a sign of cold weather.

Others believed that:

- Water could be found near trees whose branches grew toward the ground.
- Rain was most likely to occur when the moon was only $\frac{1}{4}$ full.

NUMBER FOUR

The number four was sacred among many of the early Southeastern cultures. Four was viewed as the most natural and harmonious number, a means of division for both time and space. The universe itself consisted of four cardinal directions (which together composed the realm of earthly space). Time was divided according to the four consecutive seasons (which demonstrated the perpetual cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth). The number four thus represented the totality of creation.

Beliefs concerning the number four were not superstitious or folkloric; four was not a "lucky" number. All things consisted of four parts were considered to be especially stable and harmonious. Even domestic activities were sometimes regulated by a concern for this "rightness". House-posts were used in multiples of four (12 or 16) to make Creek dwelling places balanced and stable in both the physical and spiritual worlds. Ceremonial events were usually planned to include four specific activities, be conducted by four primary leaders, or last for a total of four days. Each instance of "four" lent a special air of harmony to life. In this way, aspects of the sacred blended with every day tasks and responsibilities.

TIME

The Mvskoke people did not traditionally recognize seven "days" per "week". Time was measured according to natural phenomena, with "day" meaning the time from one sunrise to another. The next unit of time, similar to "week" but not exactly like it, was measured by phases of the moon. Approximately 7-8 days passed between each of the four moon phases.

In studying the Mvskoke terms for months and seasons, we are reminded that long before there were words to describe the cycles of nature, such cycles existed and were experienced and adapted to. Among the Mvskoke, changes in climate influenced many aspects of life including what they wore, what foods were available to eat, which animals could be hunted, and what types of community activities should take place. The appearance and movement of stellar objects generally determined the scheduling of ceremonies.

Months were designated by the completion of moon phases, each complete cycle lasting 28-30 days. Each month was equal to the time, which passed between one full moon and the next. The Mvskoke term for each of these months describes a natural event, which is occurring during that time of the year. During *Ke'hvse* (May) the mulberries ripen, while the first frost is usually during *Eho'le* (November).

Sometimes only two seasons were acknowledged: the cold season and the warm season. More often however, reference is made to four seasons generally corresponding to Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. There are two primary differences between the Mvskoke and European concepts:

- Traditionally, the Mvskoke year begins with *Hiyu'ce* (July), the completion of the harvest, and is marked by the Green Corn Ceremony.
- Seasons did not begin and end on specific calendar days. Ex. *Tvsv'cuce* (Spring) began when the days became warmer, the birds began to sing, flowers started growing, and trees became green again. It ended when days became even hotter and berries and fruit began to ripen. (Compare this to current calendars, which designate March 20 to June 21 as “spring”.)

TRIBAL TOWNS

Mvskoke people were originally (and remain today) organized by membership in a specific Tribal Town or *etul'wv* acted as both an independent community and a member of the larger “Confederacy” of Mvskoke tribes. Early reports indicated that traditionally only 18 *etul'wv* existed, though this number grew rapidly after European contact. Each town was distinguished as either Red or White (red towns typically addressed issues of war, while white towns were concerned with matters of peace).

Each *etul'wv* possessed a “sacred fire” which had been given to them in the beginning, and was kept and rekindled periodically. This fire was considered to be physical link connecting humankind and the Great Spirit. The fire supplied heat and light for both the households and the community ceremonies, as the sun supplied these things so that all life forms might flourish and continue. For the Mvskoke people, the sun and the sacred fire within the ceremonial ring (*pasko'fv*) are the same; both are considered to be male forces and so are parts of the male

ritual domain. (The sacred fire is even referred to as “poca”-grandfather). The fire, like an ancestor or tribal elder, must be treated with respect.

Today there are 16 active ceremonial grounds. Each still maintains a sacred fire, which in many cases was brought from the east during “Removal”. The communities associated with these grounds act both independently and as part of Mvskoke (Creek) Nation, and serve many of the same political and spiritual purposes as the original tribal towns.